PIJSSL

Praxis International Journal of Social Science and Literature

A Peer-reviewed Multidisciplinary e-Journal with SJIR 2025 = 6.034 & ISSN: 2581-6675

Vol. 09, No. 03 (March 2026) **DOI:** 10.51879/PIJSSL/090308

Email: editor.pijssl@gmail.com | **Website:** www.pijssl.com

OPEN ACCESS

Moral Philosophy among the Tribes of Chhotanagpur

Dr. Roshan Praveen Xalxo

Assistant Professor, B.S. College, Lohardaga, Jharkhand

Email: rpx777@gmail.com

Abstract

Unknown to the moral teachings of the established religions and unaware of the major approaches to morality, the tribes of Chhotanagpur (the Eastern region of Gondwana plateau) practise a moral philosophy whose relevance is more significant today than ever before. In the era of global interconnectivity, industrialization and rapid economic growth, humans tend to forget themselves. When the loss is irreparable, the promise of heaven, Moksha, Nirvana or the socialist welfare state becomes mere distant dreams full of doubts or just a farce; then either one holds on to the beliefs without consenting or turns agnostic. There seem to be no answers to the questions posed by their souls. Tribal moral world on the other hand, embedded in Sarna religion- the religion of adivasis in chotanagpur- continuously interconnects a human soul to its tribes- a root that gives meaning to their existence. This realization of interconnection not only directs their life but also makes them realize their responsibilities towards society at large. Returning to root- nature- the tribe brings forth a joyous unity that no promise can ever bring. The level of morality is customary yet reflective. In this paper, my attempt would be, first, to delineate clearly those features of moral philosophy that are imbued in the worldviews of the tribals of Chhotanagpur. Secondly, I shall also endeavour to construct a moral theory that shall capture the essence of tribal ethics. Lastly, the paper shall also be critical to some of the assumed flaws, thereby providing a strengthened tribal moral philosophy.

Kewords: *Sarna,Madait, Dhumkuria, Interconnectivity, Dharmes, Singbonga, Morality.*

Introduction

Beginning this paper by stating, along with many intellectuals (Kartik Oraon, 1970:19), that *Adivasis* are not Hindus. And therefore, prior to my discussions, I intend to convey the idea that the moral philosophy of the tribes under discussion here is not credited to any of the established religion. To further strengthen my position, I quote Verrier Elwin, who says "The aboriginals are the real *swadeshi* products of India, in whose presence everyone is foreign. They are ancient people with moral claims and rights thousands of years old. They were here first: they should come first in our regard." (Susana, B.C. Devalle, 1980:43) Starting my paper on an assertive note, I do not intend to disregard others literatures but only place my discussion in the context. In this context I am also reminded of William Wordsworth who writes,

"One impulse from the vernal wood,
May teach you more of a man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can." (*The Table Turned*)

This is an open access article licensed under https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0

Adivasis of Chhotanagpur have lived in seclusion, close to nature for many centuries. Some of the major tribes among them are Santhal, Oraon, Munda, Kharia, Ho, etc. Their worldview is non-hierarchical and hence interdependence. The close affinity to nature has not only taught them wisdom to match the learned but also has shaped their very being. It is nature that gives meaning to their life. Now to quote I. C. Sharma (1965) that Ethics is a theoretical study of moral problems, it should be acknowledged that ethics of *adivasis* has not been a part of theoretical study till recent times. Tribal ethics has been always treated as customary and hence at the level of subconscious. (S.C Roy, 1928:9) Although I admit the fact that tribal morality is categorically customary, still it requires larger academic engagements. The interest in such customary morality is not due to personal affiliation to the community, but more from a requirement. Reflective morality while making room for progressiveness and subjective morality has opened up a possibility of a situation where a person may lack meaning in their very existence and may feel lost. Moreover, with industrialization and globalization, economic values have taken upper hand over ethical values thanks to such subjective morality. Every established religion in contrast to tribal religion treats this world as a medium to attain the final goal, thus, again reducing the moral responsibility of an individual towards physical world. This is a sign of corroded morality. Confronted with question of relevance of such a morality, therefore, my paper discusses an alternative morality, perhaps that ties humans to the rightness and wrongness of society and not to some abstract truth or beings. It is important to begin by stating those features of *adivasi* morality (in a sense, of customary morality) that not only bring meaning to one's existence in this physical world but also remedies the morality corroded by modernity and blind pursuits of development.

In the first, it is proper to critique S.C. Roy (1928) when he calls the standard of morality of Oraons as sub-conscious. In my opposition to S.C Roy, I consider the awareness of value about rightness and wrongness as original. Agreeing Padmaja Sen, I believe that the consciousness of value is sui generis. "It consists in the practical attitude of some agent assumed towards an object or an intentional act in relation to his feelings, desires, interests, purposes and needs." (Padmaja Sen, 2003:115) And therefore Tribal morality and their ethical codes are not at the level of subconsciousness that would be strictly private and applicable only to the members of the tribe. On the other hand, I believe, that these ethical values adopted by the *adivasis*, have properties of world-consciousness but without adopting the idea of essentialism in rightness or wrongness. (S.C. Roy, 1928:14)

Speaking of such a stage, now it is apt to discuss the salient features of ethics practiced by the *adivasis* of Chhotanagpur.

Nature as Moral Agent

Perhaps, the classical dichotomy between subject and object as we find in Rene Descartes (1596-1650), or the distinction between brute facts and institutional facts to evoke John Searle (1995) reinforced by scientific attitude towards organism and non-organism has created an impression that only humans can be agents of morality. Furthermore, Tibor R Machan argues on the basis of moral responsibility that only humans can be moral agents. (1991:163-173) Such understanding has thrown nature out of moral realm. But the tribal world view considers humans as an extension of nature and even though agency is not defined by responsibility and judgments, nature is a moral agent. To be specific, for the Oraon tribe, everything in nature and art is instinct with a life or with a potentiality of life and energy. S.C Roy states, "In some objects this energy or soul lies dormant and ineffective but may, under certain circumstances, be roused to activity and operate for good or evil without a conscious will; in yet others the existence or action of an indwelling spirit is dimly recognized; and finally there are the personal supernatural beings of different grades and powers with conscious will and personality." (1928:111) The whole nature is morally conscious. It is believed that mother nature precisely knows the rightness and wrongness of any human action and can decidedly set a course that cannot be changed. And yet, there is co-existence with nature not as owners but as stewards or custodians. No wonder many tribal thinkers assert that "a tree in the hamlet ceases to be merely a tree but an important member of the village community so also the birds and animals". (Joseph M Kujur, 2001:18) The recognition of the fact

that nature is a moral agent, *adivasis* relates with nature on moral ground and therefore realizes the responsibility to protect and preserve it.

Community as Individuals

By definitions *Adivasis* are communitarians. The strong sense of affiliation with the tribe, that one belongs, indicates the significance of any tribal life. Life in communion with fellow tribes and ancestors brings heavenly experience. Thus, their senses of moral values emerge from the community and are regulated by ancestral advice (not logically but metaphorically). It is important to note here that moral values get sanctioned not by religion but by the community and seldom by customs. Decision of community overrides the customs. However, community makes every effort to imbibe/ stick to the customary values. This very process makes ethical values of *adivasis* progressive in nature. Unlike personal reflective morality which is placed higher than customary and instinctive morality by modern day ethicists, this communitarian reflective morality integrates customs with reflections, and may suggest better morality than reflective. Perhaps, this is the reason that in *adivasi* community, individuals are treated equally. From this communitarian lifestyle there emerge the values of caring, sharing and responsible stewardship. (K P. Aleaz. 2002:23)

Humanistic Values

Without religious codes ever written to dictate the conscience of *adivasis*, their practice of moral values center on Nature-Human-Spirit continuum. Their world is a world of immanent humanity "where primodial assumes a human form", where everything is human, and the human becomes a wholly other thing. (Eduardo De Castro, 2014:64) In such universe all ethical values are totally humanistic. This is a society that is egalitarian and interdependent. Its value of collective decision making can be a guiding principle to any Democracy. Communitarian- participatory cultures of *adivasis* can rescue us from the mad race of development and individualistic –competitive cultural values. Inclusive gender practices add on to the above-described features of *adivasi* morality. These humanistic values eulogize an individual and celebrate the importance of life over liberation. An *adivasi* is a moral person for being a part of this world and not for any ambition after death.

Adivasi Theory of Morality

Adivasis of Chhotanagpur adhere to customary morality which is not subjected to rigidity. The possibility of progress when reflected by the community is the hallmark of such customary morality. Members of the tribe generally exhibit qualities such are honesty, truthfulness, cooperation, non-judgmental and profoundly caring. Their nature of loving hospitality and trust has been exploited by some non-tribals in grabbing their land and resources. They are also minimalist and hoarding is considered immoral. They have a strong sense of privacy, personal and community freedom. Their philosophy of non-interference and exclusivity generates in them a sense of respect for other's space, provided they respect theirs. They would never intrude any one's private space or property. The driving force for their moral inclination might be seen in their understanding of this material world, smoothly transported to the other world. They imagine the other world as a place of "plenty to eat and to drink, cattle crops, land and children." The desire for such prosperity either in this world or the next infuses in the sense of morality. "Theft, adultery, murder, incest, calumny, false testimony, neglect of parents, and any violation to social customs are considered sinful." (Joseph M Kujur, 2001:15)

Summing up the various humane values characteristic of *adivasis*, it can be easily asserted that they do not accept Utilitarian nor Kantian theory of ethics. Virtue ethics discussed by Aristotle and religious texts do not apply to *adivasi* morality. Ethics of care definitely comes close to tribal ethics for its emphasis on compassion, but it does not accommodate customs within its practice. Neither fear of karma fruits nor promise of liberation after death can convince an *adivsis* to be moral. An *Adivasis* is moral for *here and now*. Therefore, *adivasi* morality can be theorized on the basis of custom and community; where customs are guide and community is regulative. The customs are practices within the Nature-Human-Spirit Continuum. And Land

is the 'holy' ground. If this moral philosophy is to be named, it is a Holistic theory of Morality. But to label it by a specific name would reduce its magnanimity. Such Moral understanding caters not only to human and human society but also to non-humans' aspirations alike. This detour reminds us of a poem by Abhay Xaxa,

> "So I draw my own picture and invent my own grammar
> I make my own tools to fight my own battle,
> For me, my people, my world and my adivasi self!" (2021: vii)

Conclusion

Moral Philosophy is a practice of a community. In any community moral philosophy must not be defined by individual practices; rather the moral code invisibly present should be the window to peek through moral ethics of community. Arguing for *Adivasi* morality definitely not suggests its perfection. Evil forces are always at play. The focus of the paper has been fundamentally to present a picture of what an *Adivasi* moral philosophy is and it is not an effort to defend a position that it is a perfect moral view. *Adivasi* community with its high value of cooperation must still learn to accommodate gender justice in their system. Although the *adivasi* community has abandon the traditional system of Dhumkuria (a house of learning), its description by S.C Roy concerning sexual practices does indicate some signs of debased morality. (S.C. Roy, 2015:246) It is also appropriate to note that *adivasi* society in Chhotanagpur is fundamentally patriarchic and therefore in their social and political system, known as *Parha* System, we still can see gender injustice, and gender inequality. (Vincent Ekka, 2021:87) But what is significant to consider is their moral world is rich, filled with total humane values, genuine to the aspirations of any individual who not only loves their fellow humans but also has responsibility towards nature and non-human world. This morality not only brings meaning to one's existence in this life but also makes an effort to preserve lifeworld for future generations to come.

References

Aleaz, K P, (2002) 'A tribal theology from a tribal world' IJT, 44/1&2 https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ijt/44_020.pdf

De Castro, Eduardo (2014) *Cannibal Metaphysics* (P.Skafish, Trans.) Univocal Publishing

Devalle, Susana B.C. (1980) Multi-ethnicity in India- The Adivasi peasants of Chotanagpur and Santhal parganas, *IWGIA Document*, Copenhagen

Ekka,Vincent (2021) "Lessons from the Institution of 'Indigenous Self-Governance' in *Being Adivasi*, (Eds Abhay F Xaxa and G.N.Devy) Penguin Random House India,

Kujur, Joseph M (2001) Human Longing and Fulfillment: An Adivasi Perspective, *Disputatio Philosophica*, 3(1) p.13-29.

Machan, Tibor R (1991) 'Do Animals have rights?' *Public Affairs Quarterly*, Vol 5, No-2, pp.163-173.

Roy, Sarat Chandra (2015) *The Oraons of Chotanagpur*. Ranchi

Roy, Sarat Chandra (1928), *Oraon Religion and Customs*, Calcutta

Sen,Padmaja (2003) 'Value, Valuation and Tribal Society' in *Changing tribal Life- A Socio-Philosophical Perspective*, New Delhi: Concept Publishing.

Wordsworth, William 'The Table Turned' https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45557/the-tables-turned

Xaxa, Abhay (2021) 'I am not your Data' in *Being Adivasi*, (Eds. Abhay F. Xaxa and G.N.Devy) Penguin Random House India